

Title	Vocal acts: video art and the artist's voice
Type	Article
URL	https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/16217/
Date	2020
Citation	Holdsworth, Claire (2020) Vocal acts: video art and the artist's voice. Journal of Art Historiography (23). ISSN 2042-4752
Creators	Holdsworth, Claire

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Vocal acts: video art and the artist's voice

Claire M. Holdsworth

Introduction¹

Exploring the iterative ways in which artists' voices can be recorded and revisited, this article considers approaches to dialogic speech in works of video art made in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Initially launched in the mid-1960s, video technology had a revolutionary ability to capture long takes. Users could record sound and image simultaneously for near-instantaneous playback, recording, re-recording, and often taping over what was shot before, meaning artists could easily and more affordably experiment with live-capture in their work. Often turning the camera on themselves, the artist's body and voice became important components of this emergent art form, and critical redefinition of the means through which we record and revisit speech was fundamental to many works of moving image, whether film, video, tape/slide or another medium such as performance.

As critic Sean Cubitt writes, the late seventies into early eighties was 'a moment when [videos as] an aesthetic turned into a mode of action'.² Connected to this – though not a widely used term in the UK at the time – is Fluxus composer and artist Dick Higgins' notion of 'intermedia', which describes the blurring of boundaries between previously separated disciplines, art forms and technologies in underground and counter-cultural art since the sixties.³ These hybrid re-combinations forged new discursive pathways, and video, in its capacity to both capture and create, was key to expanding new ways of seeing and hearing.

¹ Article is adapted from conference paper: C. M. Holdsworth, 'Speaking out: Split identities, politics and the ventriloquial voice in artists' film and video of the 1970s and 1980s', part of panel 'The Artist Interview: an interdisciplinary approach to its history, process and dissemination' (6 April), organised by Lucia Farinati and Jennifer Thatcher, *Association of Art History Annual Conference*, University of Brighton, 4 – 6 April 2019. It also draws from C. M. Holdsworth, 'Chapter 2, On the Use of History: telling stories and narratives of the 1980s' and 'Chapter 5, Specters of Modernism: multiple mediums and works depicting ghosts', in *History has Tongues: re-evaluating historiography of the moving image through analysis of the voice and critical writing in British artists' film and video of the 1980s* (University of the Arts London, 2015). Available at: <http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/10771/>

² Sean Cubitt, in 'The Past is a Different Medium', booklet in DVD compilation *REWIND + PLAY: An Anthology of Early British Video Art*, London: LUX, REWIND, Branded Media, 2009,

3. DVD (collated by the *Rewind* research project) includes the 1978 two-monitor version Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds* and Catherine Elwes, *Kensington Gore* (1982).

³ Dick Higgins and Hannah Higgins. 'Intermedia', *Leonardo*, 34: 1, February 2001, 49–54. <https://doi.org/10.1162/002409401300052514>.

This article considers how shifting discourses and conversational speech formats, in particular the interview, act as vehicles through which discussions from and about the past are carried into the present. As curator Nayia Yiakoumaki writes:

[a]n interview is an exchange, a dialogic method for understanding and communicating ideas. Scripted or open-ended, interviews can take many forms: print, live broadcasts, sound, recorded film, email exchanges and much more. They can be informative, performative or an art work in their own right.⁴

The reciprocal nature of an interview, and other forms of speech act, pitch artists' voices into varied contexts, recalling the ideas of critic Rebecca Schneider in her re-examination of performance art and its 'documentation' (photos, writings, film, video, etc.).⁵ This study examines the artist's (as opposed to the critic's) voice in two video works. The first is the interview performance *In Two Minds* (made from 1978 onwards) by Kevin Atherton, and the second is an early video artwork by Catherine Elwes entitled *Kensington Gore* (1982). Although different in approach from one another, Atherton and Elwes, like many other artists working in the seventies and eighties, outwardly dialogue and revisit the artistic process of making.

Interrogating form (interviews as medium)

Video- and filmmaking technologies became increasingly more affordable from the late sixties, a development that was synchronous with the foundation of co-operatives, arts labs (laboratories) and workshops in the UK well into the eighties.⁶ At this time, many artists and curators treated 'film as film' and video as totally separate art forms.⁷ Early video challenged the use of technologies in mainstream cinema and television and, despite the often intense factionalism of contextual debates about 'medium specificity', many artist film-/video-makers blurred

⁴ Exhibition, *Q&A Artists in Conversation*, 11 March – 27 August 2017, Archive Gallery, Whitechapel Gallery, London. Curated by Nayia Yiakoumaki. Available at: <https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/archive-artists-in-conversation/>

⁵ Rebecca Schneider, 'Solo Solo Solo' in Gavin Butt, ed., *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 23–47.

⁶ For example, the London Film-makers' Co-operative (founded in 1966); The Drury Lane Arts Lab (founded by Jim Haynes in 1967); and workshops such as Amber (1969); the South Hill Park Film Workshop (1975); and the Fantasy Factory Video lab (founded 1974) run by Sue Hall and John 'Hoppy' Hopkins (Hopkins and Cliff Evans also founded TV workshop/video research centre TVX in 1969).

⁷ For example, the Arts Council of Great Britain organised two 'medium-specific' exhibitions in the 1970s: *The Video Show*, Serpentine Gallery, London (1–26 May 1975); *Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film, 1910–1975* (London, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), organised by committee on behalf of the Arts Council of Great Britain, Hayward Gallery, London (3 May – 17 June 1979). See also Jonathan Walley, 'The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film', *October*, vol. 103, 2003, 15–30.

boundaries between art forms and institutions.⁸ Media-specific discourses, as defined by Katherine Hayles, are modes of 'critical interrogation alert to how the medium constructs the work and the work constructs the medium'.⁹ This interrogative critical culture, with close ties to politics and activism, emphasised the artist's voice in artworks and writings, many of which sought to re-excavate hidden histories, exploring overlooked subjects.¹⁰

Even as film/video artists interrogated medium, they sought ways to move beyond it. Evolving in parallel with modernist frameworks was the notion of the expanded field, which blurred boundaries between art forms and media, or intermedia (to return to Higgins' term). Critic Rosalind Krauss describes how conceptually the expanded 'field provides [...] for an organisation of work that is not dictated by the conditions of a particular medium'.¹¹ This encompassed not only an expansion into performance, but also an extension of the discursive context surrounding artworks, to encompass topics such as sound, where and how artworks are encountered, and actively encompassing the audience (as opposed to passively showing them something).¹² As writer Duncan White describes, 'expanded cinema moves beyond materiality – it "explodes the frame", mobilising an "active spectatorship" through performance, creating an environment that extends the experience of watching into other spaces'.¹³

Many video works have complex relationships with the past while also interrogating the medium upon which they were/are captured and replayed.¹⁴ In an

⁸ Many histories involve bringing together first-hand accounts by artists and those working at this time, such as: Jackie Hatfield, ed., *Experimental Film and Video: An Anthology*, Eastleigh: John Libbey Publishing, 2006; A. L. Rees, *A History of Experimental Film and Video: From the Canonical Avant-Garde to Contemporary British Practice*, London: BFI, 1999; David Curtis, *A History of Artists' Film and Video in Britain*, London: BFI, 2007.

⁹ Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines*, Cambridge: MIT, 2006, 6.

¹⁰ Many film/video makers made politicised works and had knowledge of ideas associated with 'history from below', such as the *History Workshop Journal*, launched 1976, which focused on radical history (published by Oxford Academic). Important to this were dialogues on gender and race as well as class, as outlined in publications from this time, such as Sheila Rowbowtham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It*, London: Pluto Press, 1973.

¹¹ Rosalind Krauss. 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October*, vol. 8, Spring 1979, 31–44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778224>.

¹² Early examples of academic re-analysis of sound and image in experimental film/video include: Rick Altman, 'Introduction', *Yale French Studies*, no. 60, 1980, 3–15.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2930000>.

[special edition dedicated to sound]; Roy Armes, *On Video*, Abingdon, Routledge, 1980; and Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema. Theories of Representation and Difference*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

¹³ Duncan White in A. L. Rees, David Curtis, Duncan White and Steven Ball, eds, *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film*, London: Tate, 2011, 110.

¹⁴ For example, these three issues of *Studio International* were published over the course of a year between 1975 and 1976 (edited by Richard Cork) – on *Avant-Garde Film in England and Europe*, 190: 978, November/December 1975; *Video Art*, 191: 981, May/June 1976; *Art and Experimental Music*, 192: 984, November/December 1976 – with overlapping contributors.

essay posthumously published in 2006, historian Jackie Hatfield considers how a history of experimental film/video is undefined and indefinable because these practices (as well as their practitioners) resist definition.¹⁵ She asks how the 'perceptual, intangible language' of works is to be reflected by research and how one should represent the equally immaterial 'passionate discussion which took place in pubs, warehouses, alternative galleries – the chinks in the culture of commercial art'.¹⁶ She continues, 'where else would we find them now but in the artists' – the subjects' – *own* voice?'¹⁷ In this sense the artist's voice is significant not only in works, but is also fundamental to histories of these practices; as the dialogic format echoes forwards in history writing, works are re-shown and re-enacted, and we re-write and re-tell stories from and about this past.

There is a fine line between the interview as a format used in and subverted by artists in artworks, as discussed in this article, and its functions as a method of gathering information in journalism or art history. In interviews, there is a balance between the undertaking (its method) and its use (how it is presented to others) – between the recording and the replay, including the written transcription of spoken dialogue. The potential uses of an interview after it has taken place – its afterlife – make it a productive format for artists as well as critics or art historians. This connection between interview as practice and the interview in the archive is evident in the exhibition *Q&A Artists in Conversation* held at the Whitechapel Gallery (London) in 2017 (which included a 1981 version of Atherton's interview-work).¹⁸ The exhibition included documentation from many expanded, performance-based works by artists who have pioneered adaptive, research-based formats, undertaking subversive critiques of history, criticism, 'the media' and the medium.¹⁹

Video art subverted the formats and infrastructure of the media, including dialogues about art. The seventies was a time when televisual infrastructures in Europe and America were being expanded, and much of this new TV content was influenced by the sonic techniques of radio programming and advertising, which was often discursive in address and format. For example, programmes like the news, advertising and talk shows tended to use a to-camera, direct address, and formats such as 'in-conversations' or 'talking-heads', which draw the viewers into a discussion. Adopting these direct modes of address and stemming from these interrogations of medium-specific criticism, the interview dialogues discussed here involve an expansive interrogation of how and why such works are realised as part of the work itself. This reflects 'practice-as-research' (as it has evolved since the seventies) and is closely related to a desire to expose the means of production. Dialogues about art, become art.

¹⁵ Jackie Hatfield, 'Video: Resisting Definition' in Sean Cubitt and Stephen Partridge, eds, *REWIND: British Artists' Video in the 1970s and 1980s*, London: John Libbey, 2012, 17–30.

¹⁶ Hatfield, 'Video: Resisting Definition', 20–21.

¹⁷ Hatfield, 'Video: Resisting Definition', 21 (italic emphasis used by Hatfield).

¹⁸ Exhibition, *Q&A Artists in Conversation*, 2017.

¹⁹ As discussed in a talk by Marysia Lewandowska, including Rosalie Schweiker and Nayia Yiakoumaki, 'Whitechapel Gallery: Marysia Lewandowska: Women's Audio Archive', *Soundcloud*, 1 June 2017. Available at: <https://soundcloud.com/whitechapel-gallery/marysia-lewandowska-womens-audio-archive>.

Let the work do the talking²⁰



Figures 1 and 2. Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds*, 2 March 1978. Video performance. Dublin: Project Arts Centre. Photo: Nigel Rolfe. Courtesy of Kevin Atherton.

Originally from the Isle of Man, artist Kevin Atherton (b. 1950) has worked in a variety of media since graduating from Leeds Polytechnic in 1972, including film/video, installations, performance, site-specific public works and sculpture.²¹ *In Two Minds* is a series of performance-conversations between the real-life Atherton and a recorded version/versions of himself. Atherton has staged numerous permutations of this interview-based video artwork since the late seventies, utilising older recordings to re-enter these dialogues at later times. Coming from a position of absurdist humour, Atherton undertakes an interrogation of the artwork in the artwork, recalling Marcel Broodthaers' critical discussion of the art world in *Interview with a Cat* (1970) a few years earlier.²² Atherton's re-performances present 'auto-interviews' that critique the technologies through which they are disseminated, the situations in which they are screened and the viewers who experience them.²³ Switching between recorded and real-life channels, these exchanges unravel the power-dynamics between interviewer and interviewee, and the roles assumed in making (as well as in watching) art and television.²⁴

²⁰ Dedication of Atherton's book *Auto-Interview*, is to his late partner Vicky Robinson (1950–2005), 'who always said "Let the work do the talking." ', *Auto-Interview*, Dublin: Flood, 2012.

²¹ See also Kevin Atherton, REWIND Artists' Video in the 1970s and 1980s database: <http://www.rewind.ac.uk/rewind/index.php/Database>

²² Marcel Broodthaers, *Interview with a Cat* (1970), *Ubuweb: Sound*. Available at: <http://www.ubu.com/sound/broodthaers.html>.

²³ See Atherton, *Auto-Interview*, 2012.

²⁴ Kevin Atherton, *Monitor Minder* (1984, video installation, colour, 60 min). In this work, a video recording of Atherton is played on one monitor, which is then placed facing another, watching the content for you. Other examples of Atherton's interrogative approach include

In Two Minds is part of an extended practice, discernible in a number of other artworks in which Atherton speaks through and with televisual apparatus. These include the two-screen installation piece *Television Interview* (1984), in which a recording of Atherton interviews an edited episode of the British soap opera *Coronation Street*, which plays on another screen, re-situating the domestically confined medium of the television-set in the public setting of the art gallery.²⁵ In another example, the installation *Monitor Minder* (1984), a recording of Atherton 'watches' other works of video art.²⁶ Between 1978 and 1982, Atherton repeated the piece *In Two Minds* six times, including an installation version in which two monitors were placed at either end of the Serpentine Gallery in London.²⁷ (figs 3 and 4) Intended to be viewed 'Wimbledon Style', one monitor assumes the role of interviewer and the other interviewee.²⁸



the artworks *Television Interview* (1984, video/digibeta, colour, two-channel installation, 28 min); *Coronation Street* (1960 – present). Granada TV / ITV.

²⁵ Kevin Atherton, *Television Interview* (1984, video/digibeta, colour, two-channel installation, 28 min).

²⁶ Atherton, *Monitor Minder* (1984).

²⁷ Exhibition, *Spring Show 2*, curated by Stuart Brisley, Serpentine Gallery (then run by the Arts Council of Great Britain), London (25 March – 16 April 1978). This group exhibition included works by Atherton, George Leventis and Ken McMullen. Available at:

<https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/whats-on/spring-show-2/>

²⁸ Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds* – dialogue transcribed from *In Two Minds* (two-screen composite version) (1978). See DVD, *REWIND + PLAY: An Anthology of Early British Video Art*, 2009.



Figures 3 and 4. Installation of Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds*, 1978. London: Serpentine Gallery.
Copyright Kevin Atherton. Courtesy of the artist.

In this installation version, the interview tape asks, 'have you done this piece before, this piece, this interview'?²⁹ The other channel replies, saying he has performed it on three occasions earlier that same year – at Project Arts Centre, Dublin, Ireland; (figs 1 and 2) Belfast Polytechnic's Fine Art Department (in Northern Ireland); and Farnham College of Art (Surrey, England). As can be seen in Figures 1 and 2, as part of the first performance in Dublin, in-person Atherton spoke with a pre-recorded on-monitor version of himself (complete with empty Guinness glass). Each of the three initial performances involved the real-life Atherton speaking to a 'question tape' recorded at the venue on the day of the performance – all of which are now lost or taped over. The in-person Atherton would then respond, sitting amid the audience. By contrast, the Serpentine installation version used two separate, pre-recorded and carefully timed monitor channels: a mirrored image of Atherton sitting on a table.

In the Serpentine installation both the interview and the response tape question what this work of art is, how it functions as an installation (instead of a performance), Atherton's relationship with the gallery and his reasons for staging it. This humorous arguing, a quick and often-abrasive exchange – and the use of both 'we' and 'I' (as well as 'you') interchangeably by both channels – infers that the recorded subject-self is always in two mind-sets. Atherton asks, does 'the work alter by being repeated and, crucially, does it benefit? Can you answer that?' The other Atherton responds, saying that the piece alters because the questions need to be changed – it is 'written into the script that it needs to be developed'.³⁰

²⁹ Atherton, *In Two Minds* (1978), transcribed.

³⁰ Atherton, *In Two Minds* (1978), transcribed.

During the conversation, Atherton discusses how earlier interviews worked well as a performance. As Atherton says, these performances included 'live and dub, there was crossed sections, times when we overlapped and times when we were quite pertinent'.³¹ Yet, it is the Serpentine installation version, the earliest surviving tape, which provides the basis for later versions of *In Two Minds*. This installation, 'where both parties are in the video monitor', (fig. 5) creates a complex fracturing of the timelines with which the work is associated.³² The dialogue is very much fixed to the conversational now in which it is played, reiterating and referring to the previous recordings and performances it discusses, yet, it also perceives and discusses the possibility of further, future iterations.



Figure 5. Still from Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds* (two-screen version), 1978. Copyright Kevin Atherton. Courtesy of the artist and REWIND Artists Video, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee.

There is a disjointed aspect to each permutation of these interview tapes and performances: as the recordings and performances are slightly out of sync, they never really take place in the same time and place. The work is only made complete when performed and/or replayed, a splitting of time made more apparent in later versions of *In Two Minds*. Not long after *In Two Minds* was first shown as an installation, the Serpentine question tape was used in more live performances – at De Appel Gallery (Amsterdam) and Mixage performance art festival at De Lantaren (Rotterdam) in 1980, either of which could be the source for a recording held in the archives of the Dutch media-art platform LIMA.³³ Atherton performed more versions at the Midland Group Gallery (Nottingham) in 1981, and other permutations up until 1982. After a hiatus between 1982 and 2001, Atherton began performing the work again, with around twenty-eight iterations performed over

³¹ Atherton, *In Two Minds* (1978), transcribed.

³² Atherton, *In Two Minds* (1978), transcribed.

³³ See Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds – Third Version*, video documentation of a performance (1978, video, black-and-white, 25 min). Available at: www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/kevin-atherton/in-two-minds-third-version/804

twenty years.³⁴ Each iteration tends to use the performance-monitor model, in which the Serpentine question tape interviews the real-life Atherton. In later and more recent enactments the age-gap between interviewer and interviewee is more pronounced.³⁵ (fig. 6) Atherton's personality is also less abrasive, his discussions more reflective about the past version of himself to which he speaks. We see the two versions locked into an ever-evolving and in some ways unending process. After all, in the initial Serpentine tape Atherton asks himself if he will perform this piece again, to which he responds, not if he 'gets it right'.³⁶



Figure 6. Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds – Interrogated* [extract], January 2018. Cobh, Co Cork: Sirius Arts Centre.

Despite the seeming rigidity of its structure, the interview as a format involves questions and responses that enable Atherton to re-enter the dialogue, a situation which accounts for the usefulness and popularity of this format in art criticism, journalism and history. As Atherton writes, his re-interrogation is:

rooted in a wanting to be at the threshold at which the work is experienced by the audience, wanting and being unwilling to hand the product over to somebody else to mediate it. It is being unable to resist being on that edge between its consumption and its production. No two things being together. ... Wanting to re-enter it and spill it all out again or put it together in a way that's different because it's been revisited.³⁷

³⁴ Later performances of *In Two Minds* include at the exhibition *Analogue*, The Box, FACT Liverpool (2–3 March 2007); the launch of a compilation DVD, *REWIND + PLAY* (2009), Stills Gallery, Edinburgh; and Atherton performed at the exhibition, *Seeing In the Dark (A Group Show)*, Circa, Newcastle (19 October – 12 November 2011). Curated by Circa and Steven Ball. Available at: <http://www.circaprojects.org/exhibition/162-Heather.html>

³⁵ Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds – Interrogated*, Sirius Arts Centre, Cobh, Co. Cork followed by discussion/interrogation with Sarah Hayden, January 2018. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6j0LFOx7Og>

³⁶ Atherton, *In Two Minds* (1978), transcribed.

³⁷ Atherton in Hatfield, 2005, 'Interview with Kevin Atherton' by Jackie Hatfield (21 July), *REWIND*, 2–3. Available at: www.rewind.ac.uk/documents/Kevin%20Atherton/KAT510.pdf

The interview here shifts to another, more experiential mode, beyond linear narrative or accounts and writings that state finite facts, remixing as well as restarting the dialogue anew.³⁸

Atherton's ongoing internalised dialogue with himself (about this artwork) creates a sense of uncanny division, stemming from his externalised separation, as well as a self-awareness triggered by the act of encountering the recording of his own voice. Writing on the cultural history of the art of 'ventriloquism' – where a performer throws their voice so that it seems to emanate from another source/object – theorist Steven Connor describes how, 'I participate in my voice only by coming apart from it: indeed, it is only because I am always apart from my voice that such participation is possible'.³⁹ In this way, the voice is always, by its very nature, separated from the body. As Connor writes, perhaps 'the commonest experiential proof of the voice's split condition (as at once cleaving to and taking leave from myself), is provided by the experience of hearing one's own recorded voice'.⁴⁰ This sense of division – whereby the voice leaves us at the exact moment it is uttered – is amplified in Atherton's recorded and real-life variations on the interview.

The dialogue in an interview is, in many ways, antiphonal, as it involves call and response – alternate soundings, where the second phrase is heard as a direct commentary on or response to the first. In Atherton's interviews these commentaries and responses take on a life of their own, with the interview questions pitched into unknown future contexts, and a peculiar sense of disconnect between the call and the response, which exist in different time zones. This is evident when both channels are recorded, and particularly in more recent versions,⁴¹ in which the format, body of Atherton and locations are totally removed from one another. (fig 7)

Connor identifies a paradoxical in-between inhabited by the 'ventriloquial voice', which emanates from or attaches itself to other sources, observing that it exists in the space between pure vocalisation and the communication or expression of ideas.⁴² This mirrors the vocal acts required to activate *In Two Minds*, as the questions only make sense when they are answered and vice-versa. In later performances, the viewer/audience witnesses Atherton negotiating a ventriloquial in-between, in which time, acts of listening and speaking are split.

³⁸ Kevin Atherton, 'In Two Minds', in Eduardo Navas, Owen Gallagher and xtine burrough, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Remix Studies*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2014, 509–15.

³⁹ Steven Connor, *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 5.

⁴⁰ Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 7.

⁴¹ Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds – Past Version* (1976 – 2006), 2006, video, colour, two-channel installation, 28 min. Shown at exhibition *The Studio Sessions*. Organised by Tanya Zimbardo. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 3 July – 13 September 2009. Available at: <https://www.sfmoma.org/exhibition/the-studio-sessions/>. Also included performative videos by General Idea, Christian Jankowski, Mads Lynnerup, Joe Sola.

⁴² Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 42.

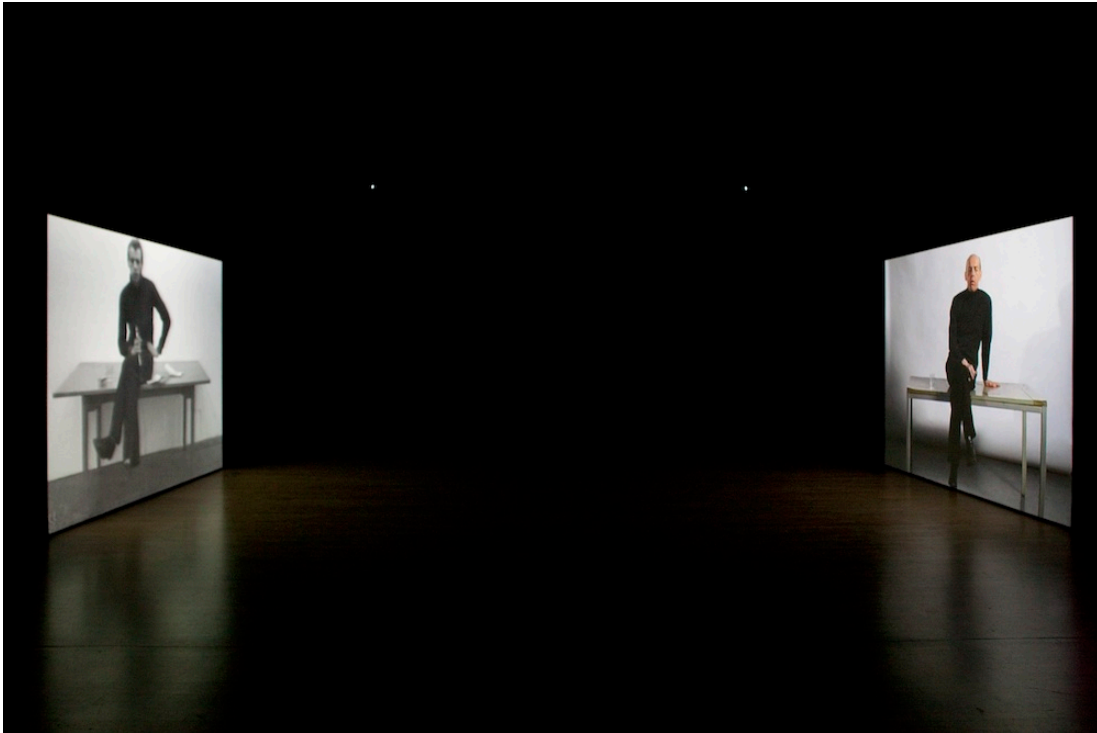


Figure 7. Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds – Past Version*, 1976 – 2006, 2006. Video, colour, two-channel installation, 28min. Shown at exhibition, *The Studio Sessions*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2009. Copyright Kevin Atherton. Courtesy of the artist.

In the 1978 interview tape, Atherton asks whether ‘the whole issue’ underlying the work ‘is merely the dialogue’, to which his interviewed mirror image responds, ‘that’s what any art is about, it’s only as good as the dialogue that it produces afterwards ... it’s not just a dialogue, it’s a video dialogue’.⁴³

Metadiscourse

When discussing dialogues on as well as within video (along with other forms of experimental filmmaking), cinema theorist Catherine Russell observes that by ‘inscribing themselves on the level of “metadiscourse” film and video makers ... identify with their technologies of representation, with a culture of independent filmmaking, alongside their other discursive identities’.⁴⁴ This acute awareness of medium often extends to self, as also observed by Rosalind Krauss in her now canonised essay ‘Video: The aesthetics of narcissism’ (1976), in which she describes how early video had subjective dimensions in its ability to reflect back to the artist an image of themselves.⁴⁵ In the case of Atherton, there is also a sense of echoing forwards: an iterative metadiscourse unfolding over time. This self-inscription mirrors contextual discourses and interconnected concepts from psychoanalysis,

⁴³ Kevin Atherton, *In Two Minds* (1978), transcribed.

⁴⁴ Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video*, Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 1999, 278.

⁴⁵ Rosalind Krauss, ‘Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism’, *October*, vol. 1, Spring 1976, 51–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778507>.

post-structuralism and feminism which, although not discussed in this article, were an important framework for video practices and theory.⁴⁶ In another later interview, this time in dialogue with Hatfield (whose discussion of the artist's voice was mentioned earlier), Atherton observes a further split in the location from which he both speaks out and listens in.

The thing never is static. It never stops. It's never over. You can't draw a line on it. It is, in a way, like being resistant now, twenty or thirty years later from the first tape I ever made, being resistant now to draw a line under that, box it up and say "That's it, product", because the very reason for being involved in the first instance, was that it wasn't like that, it was never over. It's a process performance. It's about re-animating and re-activating. Making the "now" whenever the "now" is, is now the point.⁴⁷

This could be termed a schizophrenic – or schizophonic, after the writings of Avital Ronell and other sound theorists – situation of vocal division, triggered by playback, by the call and response of dialogue.⁴⁸

Artists engaged with video technology as a device that enabled them to go beyond mere documentation in the presentation of the performative self. The playback constituted a unique event, a performance in and of itself. According to Krauss, 'the medium of video art is the psychological condition of the self, split and doubled by the mirror-reflection of synchronous feedback'.⁴⁹ Yet, playback of the voice and conversational, antiphonal formats are not a mirroring of self per se: they create a compounded, changing dialogue, a doubling of time and perspective.⁵⁰ This complex expansion, in turn, echoes that of the artist in driving dialogue not only in but also about their work, which led to a marked increase in magazines and periodical publications on art in the seventies, including many dedicated to experimental video and film in the UK.⁵¹ Dialogue-oriented methods of criticism emphasise the subject, and subvert paper as the de-facto medium of critical communication, re-directing the written flows of transcription (an important part of the interview process).

⁴⁶ See issues of journal *Screen* in the 1970-80s, to which many filmmakers/video-artists contributed, including video pioneer Stuart Marshall, theorists such as Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/screen/issue>

⁴⁷ Atherton in Hatfield, 'Interview with Kevin Atherton', 3.

⁴⁸ Avital Ronell, 'Derrida to Freud: The Return Call' in *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989, 84–94. Schizophonia as a concept is also discussed in sound studies, in writing by R. Murray Schafer, who discusses split sound in 'Radical Radio', *Ear Magazine of New Music*, 11: 5 and 12: 1 [double issue], February/March 1987.

⁴⁹ Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', 55.

⁵⁰ Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', 55.

⁵¹ For example, *Independent Video* (later renamed *Independent Media*), published over 100 issues, on a monthly basis, between 1981 and 1989. Another important publication from this period is *Undercut: The Magazine from the London Film-makers' Co-op*, which collectively published nineteen issues between 1981 and 1990.

The metadiscursive nature of much video and wider art writing, in this moment of transition between the seventies and the eighties, extends to history writing more recently, including publications by artist, curator and critic Catherine Elwes (b. 1952). Developing out of painting, Elwes' video and performance works explore representation, the body, gender and identity.⁵² Writing in the book *Video Art: A Guided Tour* (2005), she describes how the early eighties saw the emergence of 'new narratives' in film and video art. This was a time of conservative shift, following the election of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1979.⁵³ Even before this shift, theory-heavy strands of 'structuralist' filmmaking, which emerged in the UK in the mid-seventies, sought to politicise and question hegemonies in film, cinema, art and society.⁵⁴ Referring to the fact that these theories had received relatively widespread attention in publications, screenings, festivals and exhibitions, Elwes outlines that the new generation of artists that came afterwards, were 'careful not to replace the old order of hierarchical representation with new truths that could become just as dogmatic and entrenched as the old "Master Narratives"'.⁵⁵ One approach to filmmaking that was totally different to such 'entrenched' ideas came from the theories of playwright Bertolt Brecht, whose *Verfremdungseffekt*, or 'alienation effect', encouraged a distanced perspective that allowed consideration of the wider historical context.⁵⁶ Practitioners such as Elwes developed new ways of moulding speech, 'techniques for telling stories whilst making the mode of storytelling visible, the artifice of narrative laid bare as it weaves its spell'.⁵⁷

The unreliable narrator

In the video artwork *Kensington Gore* (1981), Elwes uses a repetitious oscillation of multiple re-enactments to re-tell a story.⁵⁸ This story concerns an accident that befell a prop assistant on a film-set where Elwes was working as a make-up artist, re-creating wounds for a battle scene in a historical BBC drama set during the Jacobean period in the seventeenth century. The title of the work refers to the address of the Royal College of Art (on the street 'Kensington Gore') where Elwes was studying when she made the film, and the bright red make-up used to simulate blood in artificial wounds for theatre and television. Compound perspectives collide in this

⁵² Catherine Elwes studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London and graduated from the MA Environmental Media at the Royal College of Art in 1982. See REWIND, *Cate Elwes*. Available at: <http://www.rewind.ac.uk/rewind/index.php/Database>.

⁵³ The Conservative party won the British General Election in 1979 and Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first female Prime Minister (replacing Labour party leader Jim Callaghan). The Conservative party won increasing majorities in the General Elections of 1983 and 1987.

⁵⁴ 'Structuralist' filmmaking has mutable meanings arising from the different publications on this subject that are also closely associated with the personalities who wrote them. See Peter Gidal, ed., *Structural Film Anthology*, London: BFI, 1976. See also P. Adams Sitney, *Visionary Film: The American Avant-Garde*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1st edn 1974, 2nd edn 1979.

⁵⁵ Catherine Elwes, *Video Art: A Guided Tour*, London: IB Tauris, 2005, 82.

⁵⁶ Elwes, *Video Art*, 82.

⁵⁷ Elwes, *Video Art*, 82. See Martin Walsh, *The Brechtian Aspect of Radical Cinema*, BFI, 1981.

⁵⁸ Catherine Elwes, *Kensington Gore* (1982, video, colour, 15 min). Also included in DVD compilation, DVD, *REWIND + PLAY*, 2009, which also includes Atherton's *In Two Minds*.

work, which describes the incident from different points of view, in different voices, and using a variety of performative actions including mime and recreating a wound.

During the re-tellings we hear a first-person account of the accident in which the line between reality and fiction become confused. Elwes describes her shock and the dissonance between recreating gruesome wounds and witnessing a real-life injury while making them. The video presents fast intercut scenes in which the narrative is performed for and read aloud to the camera. At the start of the work, we see a close-up shot of a neck, belonging to artist Keith Frake (a fellow student at the RCA),⁵⁹ as hands carefully fashion a fake wound, which is built and painted throughout the work. (fig. 8)



Figure 8. Still from Catherine Elwes, *Kensington Gore*, 1982. Copyright Catherine Elwes. Courtesy of the artist.

As Elwes speaks about the accident, lines and words are repeated, 'doubled by a different voice reading the same text as a "spontaneous" interview', belonging to the artist Judith Goddard, another fellow student who also appears in the work.⁶⁰ This is a performative permutation of an interview, but rather than responding back and forth, the dialogue tends to cut lines and ideas in half, repeating and in doing so questioning, what was said before.

Goddard's voice is deliberately flat and Elwes' readings sound acted, like they are pretending to be spontaneous but despite these different affectations, each

⁵⁹ For more information about Keith Frake, see LUX. Available at:

<https://lux.org.uk/artist/keith-frake>.

⁶⁰ Elwes, *Video Art*, 86. Judith Goddard was also studying at the RCA at the time. See website <http://judithgoddard.com/> and LUX website <https://lux.org.uk/artist/judith-goddard>.

rendition is constructed. Elwes' and Goddard's voices overlap with the intercut takes, to create a mutating acoustic collage, mixing diegetic voice and voiceover. Elwes also manipulates the different modes of listening through which we typically listen to and comprehend narrative in more conventional cinema/television.⁶¹ We see sound effects being made through foley, for example when Elwes and Goddard repeatedly attempt to replicate the noise made by the props man's head (when he is kicked by the horse). They clap and we hear their voices saying 'crack' over and again. Sounds exist cut off from their true sources, which confuses the viewer, as the frame constantly cuts away from the aspects of the story to which they connect, severing causal links to what we hear. The viewer attempts to marry the story heard to these many re-enactments, as sounds and moments from the story appear out of order and lines repeat.

Adopting a Brechtian approach, Elwes mimes aspects of her described narrative to camera in the carefully lit studios (on the eighth floor) of the RCA. She over-performs other actions described in the story: someone fainting when they saw the accident, or exaggeratedly slapping the klegs (horseflies) that bit everyone on-set. (fig. 9) Red paint is thrown over Elwes' face and the studio walls, echoing the sounds and gore described in the story. (fig. 10). These stilted, simply mimed movements create an overtly staged re-enactment, emphasising that the narrative occurred at a time other than the one in which she now speaks. This stresses the industry of artifice used in film, television or theatre, and the complex levels of illusion that intersect in such art forms.



⁶¹ See Michel Chion, 'Three Listening Modes' in Claudia Gorbman, ed. and trans., *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 25–34.



Figures 9 and 10. Stills showing Catherine Elwes miming in Catherine Elwes, *Kensington Gore*, 1982. Copyright Catherine Elwes. Courtesy of the artist and REWIND Artists Video, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee.

Different shots or takes of Elwes and Goddard reading the account from a script while sitting at a table in a dark room are intercut with the scenes described above. (fig 11) We hear their voices reading diegetically, but they also act as voiceover to the montaged shots of mime, blood splatter, and the fake wound as it is painted onto the neck. (fig 12)





Figure 11. Still showing Catherine Elwes in Catherine Elwes, *Kensington Gore*, 1982. Copyright Catherine Elwes. Courtesy of the artist and REWIND Artists Video, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee.

Figure 12. Still showing Keith Frake in Catherine Elwes, *Kensington Gore*, 1982. Copyright Catherine Elwes. Courtesy of the artist and REWIND Artists Video, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee.

The story is told in full several times throughout the work, its progression interrupted by the sound of microphone cuts, recorded crackle, coughs and mumbled side-comments. These elements infer other re-tellings beyond what the viewer hears and sees. This combination of many takes creates 'multiple points of view adding up to a provisional representation of an event'.⁶² The allusions and illusions we see and hear accumulate in the perception of the viewer, whose understanding is constantly shifted by the interjecting dialogue and intercut story as it restarts time and again. In among these fast-paced re-tellings, the visual progression of the wound acts as a core linear element, around which 'the mimed and spoken narrative reiterations orbit'.⁶³

Once the wound is completed, the head turns, the camera pans out and we see the full face and shoulders of Keith Frake, who stares directly into the camera. (figs 13 and 14) This is a grisly yet playful, peripatetic moment with a dramatic sense of revelation that revels in re-staging the past, in witnessing representations of it. *Kensington Gore* examines how we speak about the past, reiterating the technical processes involved with 'staging' a story (factual or fictional), and examining the ways in which we suspend our disbelief.

⁶² Elwes, *Video Art*, 87.

⁶³ Description by Elwes in email correspondence with C. M. Holdsworth, August 2020.

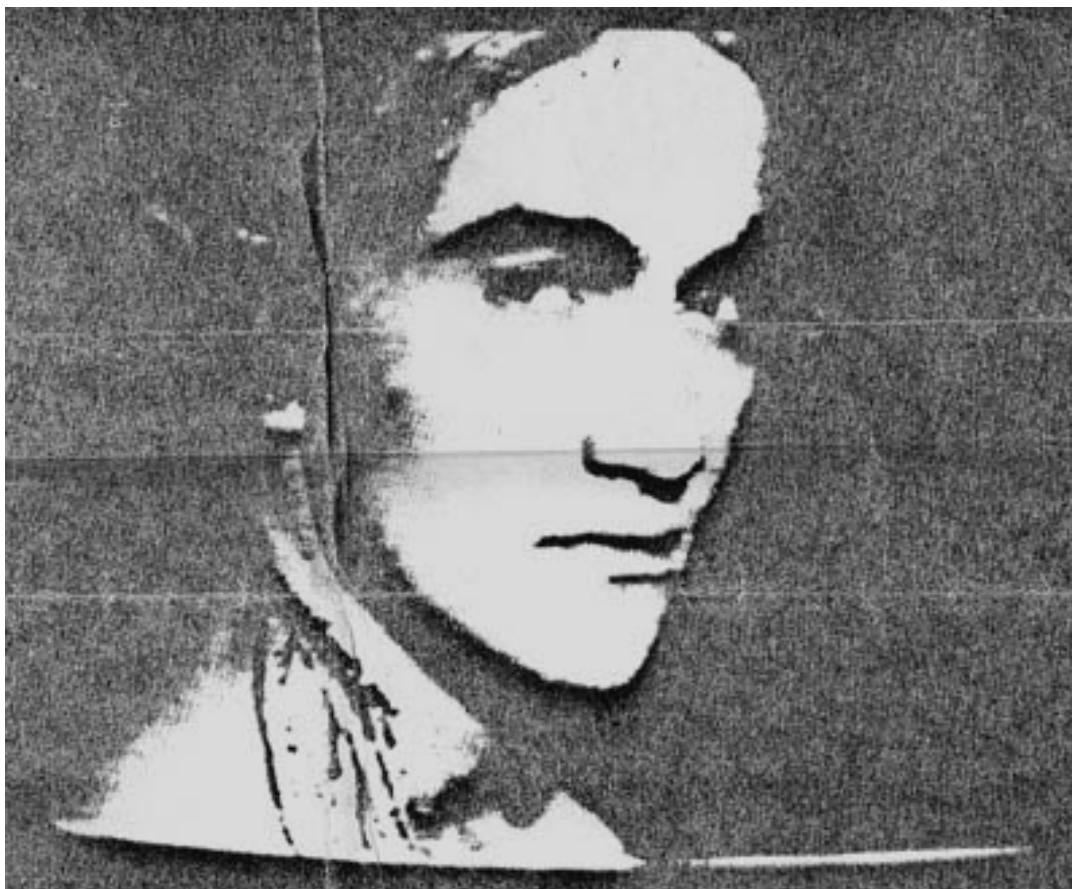


Figure 13. Still showing Keith Frake in Catherine Elwes, *Kensington Gore*, 1982. Copyright Catherine Elwes. Courtesy of the artist and REWIND Artists Video, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee.

Figure 14. Flyer for Catherine Elwes, *Kensington Gore*, 1982. Source: British Artists' Film and Video Study Collection, Central Saint Martins Museum (University of the Arts London). Copyright Catherine Elwes. Courtesy of the artist.

Elwes' experience of the accident is dictated by her work as a make-up artist, specialising in simulating wounds, and for a time she does not realise the accident is real. The staged wounds become mixed with the real injury, a surreal double-take that reveals the 'slippery relationship between fantasy and fiction, between what we know to be simulated and what we nonetheless accept as real'.⁶⁴

In the essay 'On the Mic: how amplification changed the voice for good' (2002), Ian Penman discusses the technological capture of the voice, observing how recording in some ways undermines the veracity implicit to speaking (and in this case singing):

Far from truthful, the microphone can record lies, doubts, concealments, allowing manipulative "takes" of the voice from which a certain tone can be synthesized on a studio console. Thus the presumed truth of the voice (as in some scene of confession or gospel gnosis) cannot be thought of as immutable, as the voice is always now – via recording – at a remove from itself ...⁶⁵

This removed perspective connects with the confusing repetitions in *Kensington Gore*, with the many takes signifying Elwes' inability to recognise the reality of what was happening around her, her inability to switch off the 'illusion-building mind' of a theatrical make-up artist. She only reconnected to reality when another member of the crew, the director, fainted. Each cut and extra take in this montaged and mimed re-construction calls attention to removed mutability via the voice.

Kensington Gore emphasises that by 'multiplying voices and points of view, a narrative [is] no longer attributable to a single originating source'.⁶⁶ In *Kensington Gore* there is no interviewer or interviewee; through multiple voices and repetition, the narrative constantly re-interrogates itself. This plurality destabilises the idea of a clear artist's or authorial voice. In her writing, Elwes frames new approaches to narrative as a reaction to the formalist art criticism of the seventies and theories such as those of Roland Barthes in his influential essay 'The Death of the Author' of 1967. As she writes, for practitioners of film and video working in eighties Britain 'the disappearance of the artist' was not a 'viable proposition', as 'being neither seen nor heard' is counterproductive.⁶⁷ This channels important contextual ideas in much feminist work at the time, which sought to find 'new ways of becoming visible without reproducing forms of representation that had been previously so restrictive if not oppressive to women'.⁶⁸

With *Kensington Gore*, there is a slippage in perspective at different times, between stating facts, remembering and recounting an experience, which is tied to the many recordings, the different takes and the different voices it combines. Just as

⁶⁴ Elwes, *Video Art*, 87.

⁶⁵ Ian Penman, 'On the mic: how amplification changed the voice for good' in Rob Young, ed., *Undercurrents: The Hidden Wiring of Modern Music*, London: Continuum, 2002, 25–34.

⁶⁶ Elwes, *Video Art*, 85–87.

⁶⁷ Elwes, *Video Art*, 80.

⁶⁸ Description by Elwes in email correspondence with C. M. Holdsworth, August 2020.

Atherton denies a single reading or context by revisiting *In Two Minds*, so too does Elwes infer shifting meanings and perspectives of the world around us. Theorist Mladen Dolar observes that 'the written word has no power if it is not preceded by, and based in, the living voice. The authority of writing depends on its being the faithful copy of the voice'.⁶⁹ The artist's voice, whether spoken or written, is not only subject to these associations, many works, including *Kensington Gore*, seek ways to address, use and/or subvert these perceptions of authorship and authority, by pluralising voices, and multiplying the possibilities for numerous perspectives.

Conclusion

The alternative contexts in which Atherton has re-performed *In Two Minds* and the multiple moments which come together and overlap in Elwes' re-telling of a story (and, indeed, her writing), shift the time frame with which we associate and locate the performative act of speaking in these works. This active iteration connects with the peculiar temporality of performance art, as an experienced unique moment. Both involve a ritualised re-enactment of a dialogue, a re-telling of a story, which connects with Schneider's discussion of how the 'notion of performance as disappearance crosses chiasmatically with ritual – ritual in which, through performance, we are asked, again, to (re)found ourselves in repetition'.⁷⁰ Involving mediums human and technological in nature, the re-recorded interviews and dialogic speech acts in the works explored here, use back-and-forth responses that enable viewers and artists/participants to re-enter conversations from (and about) the past. These dialogues indicate a move away from the 'critic' as a commentator, towards the self-producing, self-narration of art by artists, a shift that can be seen in the development of artists' writings from the sixties through to today. The artist's voice is central in the interrogated medium as a mode of self-critique, contrasting with formal criticism, which asserts the authority of the critic over the artist. The basis for criticism that stems from the artist's voice is different to that undertaken by critics who write about art: these are dialogues in art. The artist's voice exists both within and external to their artworks, and the dialogues about as well as within these artworks adapt over time, they alter with each re-telling.

The artworks discussed here reiterate the meta-interrogations of self and capturing self enacted within critical writing in the UK in the seventies and eighties, but also how these dialogues continue to be re-enacted and reactivated today. The intercut iterations in *Kensington Gore*, and later versions of *In Two Minds*, shift the locations of viewing geographically, temporally, spatially and conceptually, unsettling the logic of linear time. At the same time, these split, mutable, synchronised dialogues occur only through their technological re-play, which is time-based. This time-split allows Atherton to re-perform, to re-enter the dialogue

⁶⁹ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More*, London: MIT, 2006, 109. Dolar's reading of the voice involves multiple levels, which although not discussed here, have relevance for understanding the different modes of speech in relation to the artist's interview and artist's voice as topics.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Schneider, 'Performance Remains', *Performance Research*, 6: 2, 2001, 100–108. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2001.10871792>, 106.

of *In Two Minds*, whereas in *Kensington Gore* the intercut feeds show staged acts, causing a confrontation between curiously doubled experiences (real and imagined life).

These ritualised re-enactments encompass a reinterrogation that is reflected in retrospectives of video art in recent years – for instance, when *Kensington Gore* was included in the *Polytechnic* group show at Raven Row (London) in 2010⁷¹ or the many performances of *In Two Minds* that have taken place since the 2000s – mirror wider critical interest in media memory, archaeologies and archives since in the 2000s.⁷² As Elwes writes or Atherton re-enacts, the process of revisiting and re-exhibiting is not only symptomatic of the new nows in which we watch and listen to these works, but also the future contexts into which they were pitched, when the dialogue restarts.

Writing on performance art and its documentation, Rebecca Schneider explores the ways in which these actions or acts might be said to remain. She writes, 'the scandal of performance relative to the archive is not that it disappears (this is what the archive expects) but that it "becomes itself through disappearance" (as Phelan writes) and that it remains'.⁷³ This becoming through disappearance connects with the situation of the recorded voice, split and separated in time, it alters with each replay, taking on a ventriloquial life of its own, and restarting more, other conversations in the future. These video voices, at the intersection between live performance and moving image, are divided subjects, resisting static contexts and categorisation. The questions they asked instigate or trigger antiphonal responses, open dialogues, pitched and sent into the future.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the editors for their commitment to an article with a great many images and moving parts, and also to the artists Kevin Atherton and Catherine Elwes for their time and feedback in the writing/publication of this article. Thanks to Paul McAree of FLOOD (Dublin) and Lismore Castle Arts (Lismore) for providing a rare copy of the book *Auto-Interview*. Images were captured by Adam Lockhart at the REWIND Project, School of Media Arts and Imaging, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design, University of Dundee, Scotland. The presentation of this paper was also originally supported by a bursary from the Doctoral and Early Career Researchers (DECRs) network of the Association for Art Historians (2019).

⁷¹ Exhibition *Polytechnic*. Curated by Richard Grayson, London, 9 September – 7 November 2010. Available at: <http://www.ravenrow.org/exhibition/polytechnic/>. Richard Grayson, ' "Embroided". Essay to accompany exhibition, Polytechnic', *Raven Row*, 2010. Available at: <http://www.ravenrow.org/texts/26/>

⁷² For writings on archives and memory, see Mark Fisher, Andreas Huyssen and Carolyn Steedman. For an account of this in relation to medium and the media, see also Amy Holdsworth, 'Television Resurrections: Television and Memory', *Cinema Journal*, 47: 3, Spring 2008, 137–144. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30136121>.

⁷³ Schneider, 'Performance Remains', 105. Schneider here cites Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1993, 146.

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